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One in eight people cannot afford enough food to lead a productive working life. In the mid 1990s, an estimated 1.1 billion people lived in absolute poverty, that is, on less than $1 a day. Their number increases at about the same rate as world population, and in the year 2000, less than nine months from now, it will reach 1.3 billion. To some, this is a clear indication that poverty alleviation strategies have not yet worked, although they have been implemented for almost four decades now.

Like wealth, poverty is not shared equally around the world. In East Asia and the Pacific, economic growth actually reduced the total number of poor from 182 million in 1985 to 169 million in 1990. Over the same period, in sub-Saharan Africa, the number rose from 184 million to 216 million, which represents half the population.

Poverty reduction and agriculture
Simply a question of access?

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come led to a disproportionate increase in poverty. In Côte d’Ivoire, average per capita income fell by 13% between 1985 and 1988, but the proportion of poor climbed from 30% to 46. But income is just one of the many other factors that aggravate poverty: access to education, housing, health, safe drinking water, sanitation, and a clean environment.

As stakeholders, our task today is to design win-win agricultural policies that are not disadvantageous to any one, provide sustainable food security, and reduce poverty. It is a challenge posed by a world whose grain reserves are estimated as being secure for less than 50 days, and whose population of poor people is growing by more than 175,000 each day.

The Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) argues for a vigorous pursuit of agriculture for four reasons, all linked to poverty reduction: first, to generate jobs and income in rural areas; second, to provide reasonably-priced food for growing (urban) needs; third, to stimulate overall economic growth; and fourth, to conserve natural resources.

Combinations of strategies

The complexity of these issues absorbed participants at a workshop on “Agricultural Sector Strategies for Poverty Reduction in Eastern and Southern Africa” organised by CTA in Wageningen in November 1998. At the outset, they defined six roles for agriculture in the reduction—or alleviation—of poverty. In Africa, agriculture provides more than 85% of the food on the continent. It is the major source of livelihood, generating employment for more than two-thirds of the labour force. It creates markets for suppliers of equipment, other goods, and services sold to agricultural workers. It provides raw materials for new industry. It earns foreign exchange through exports. And, it is often the main source of savings, which banks could mobilise for investment.

The most effective blend of policies for poverty alleviation will always depend on local factors. Where poverty is concentrated amongst the landless, there should be a combination of policies for absorbing labour, for helping poor households diversify their livelihoods, and, some might add, for land reform. Where poverty is among smallholders, policies should maximise small-scale strategies. Then again, where poverty is largely urban, the policies should address the need for cheap food supply. Some concerns are common to all: priority should be given to households headed by women, environmental losses should not be tolerated.

Three main strategies are being developed. The Food First strategy (not to be confused with Frances Lappé’s book ‘Food First’, which examines the inequitable distribution of food) concentrates on maximising food output in the short-term, at the expense of cash crops or long-term research options. The Growth First strategy focuses on high-return crops, whether food or other crops. The Poverty First approach enables poor people to acquire food through production, price regulation, and income generation. Food First would probably have the least impact on poverty and be short-lived. Poverty First could protect the poor and empower them—in that order. A combination of Growth First with Poverty First strategies could be most beneficial, but only if the wealth created by growth is channelled appropriately. Such combinations convey encouraging trends.

The obsession with the market as the overall solution is fading, and the need for a better understanding of poverty, and its various forms, is being recognised. Isn’t material poverty simply about people not having adequate access to assets (calories, credit, education, opportunities, markets)? In theory, the world’s food supply can adequately meet everyone’s caloric needs, to mention just one asset. The challenge now is to design acceptable policies that re-distribute existing assets and create new ones. If this can be done with the same seductive simplicity as the World Bank’s new slogan “For a World Free of Poverty” then the intention of many African governments to halve the numbers of their poor by 2015 will be much more than a dream.

For further reading:

The summary report of the seminar organised by CTA on “Reducing poverty through agriculture: sector strategies in Eastern and Southern Africa”, held in Wageningen, The Netherlands, from 23 to 25 November 1998, will be available soon. Details will be given in Spore 81.


Alleviating poverty

- In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of poor people is growing faster than population.
- Poverty is not only about income, but also access to all basic needs.
- In poverty alleviation, agriculture has six roles:
  - food supply
  - livelihood
  - market
  - raw material
  - foreign exchange
  - savings
- Simply growing more food will not reduce poverty.
- Various strategies need to be combined: more food, but also more work, sustainable income, environmentally sound techniques.

Walking for water: how long has this been going on?

Even if poverty were viewed simply as an issue of material wealth, it would be naive to think that agriculture’s contribution to reducing poverty is restricted to growing more food. Obviously, it is imperative to grow more food, and fast, because food production in most ACP countries grows at a rate slower than their populations. But, it is not just a question of what you do, but how you do it, and under which conditions.

The future is expensive

Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), explains the conditions: “Humanity’s traditional endeavour throughout history has been to create more food from the earth. The logic has been that if we bring more land under the plough, intensify labour and refine techniques, the supply of food will grow commensurately. But this logic of humankind has not been that of the environment. Loss of biodiversity, salination, soil erosion and desertification have gradually reduced the productivity of agricultural land. In some cases this process may be irreversible. Every tonne of fertile topsoil washed away, every hectare claimed by desert sands, every reservoir filled with silt, further drains world productivity and spells higher costs for future increases in output.”

Moreover, this “Grow! Grow!” logic has improved the living and livelihoods of a few people at the expense of others. By favouring the rich in the distribution of land, water, and inputs, some agricultural policies have even led to increased poverty.

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